

FOREWORD

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B. This is tape 1 of an interview with the Honorable U. Alexis Johnson, Deputy Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, by William Brubeck, Senior Staff Member, National Security Council, the White House, at the time most of these events took place until July of 1963 Deputy Executive Secretary and then Executive Secretary of the State Department, working in close association with Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson had served in Korea and Japan and China, Manchuria and the Philippines - in the Far East over a long period of time. He started in 1935 in the Foreign Service. His last post before coming back to Washington was an Ambassador to Thailand and U.S. Representative on the SEATO Council. He came back to Washington in the Kennedy Administration as Deputy Under Secretary of State, arriving on April 16, 1961, and reported for duty on April 17, in the middle of the Bay of Pigs crisis. During his subsequent career, for the last two and a half years in the Department during the Kennedy Administration, he has been responsible for politico-military affairs in the State Department, coordination of intelligence matters, and has been a general deputy to the Secretary on a wide range of matters, particularly Far East problems.

Let me start this, Alex, if I may, by asking you what your first contact in any form with John F. Kennedy was.

J. I am sorry, Bill - I can't remember the exact day. However, I remember within two or three days of my arrival back

J. No, I don't think he did, and whereas it offended my probably somewhat overdeveloped and possibly overly bureaucratic and orderly nature, I think that from his standpoint it served a function, although it gave some of us a pain and difficulty sometimes. Let me say at this point, whatever it may have been, a meeting with the President was always - the only term I can use is - zestful. It was never cut and dried. You never knew exactly what was going to happen, and there was always a great deal of zest in working with him and working for him. I think all of us that were around him felt that very much.

B. Did you have the feeling that he sometimes made quite an original contribution to a meeting in the sense of bringing in new ideas, new perspectives, on the problem at the table?

J. Yes, I would say so. I am trying to recall some specific instances. He did it more by indirection rather than by direction. He did it more by the questioning technique - the probing, questioning technique - than by direct contribution.

B. Well, it was a lot of fun working for him. Did you ever see him lose his temper in these meetings - or let his emotions carry him away - was he always very cool and contained?

J. He always gave the impression of coolness. It was one thing - he always gave you a sense of confidence and coolness around him. It was one thing he was always able to inspire, even during the most critical periods of the Cuban affair. As far as my own observation was concerned, you always felt that he was - sometimes even a little casual, I would say. But he certainly never gave the impression of the deep nervous and emotional energy that you knew was at work within him.

B. Well, this really brings us, as far as your specialized relationships with him are concerned, down to the Cuba crisis. Let me say before that, I gather you were involved in that curious exercise in February 1961 after the Bay of Pigs in a second look at Cuba, but that you were not directly involved with the President on this. You worked with Lansdale and company on some . . .

J. Yes, we shouldn't miss that period. General Ed Lansdale was brought in and given a wide mandate to "do something" about Cuba. I am trying to remember - it had a - it was a very tightly held operation and elaborate offices were set up over in the Pentagon. I again represented the Department on this. Elaborate plans were produced. Serious frictions were set up between Lansdale and CIA. You see, a part of the trouble in many of these things - I think maybe it goes somewhat back to the Adolf Berle period as Coordinator of Latin American Affairs. Ed Lansdale was Coordinator of Cuban Affairs. The President had the sense that if you had a problem, you put somebody in charge of it - and told everybody that they had to work for him. The big and old Departments of the Government find it very difficult to work this way. And it doesn't work because ultimately it is the Secretaries that have to dispose of the resources. It is the Secretaries that have to approve the spending of money. And it is very difficult to give somebody other than the President himself - and the President himself of course has it - it is very difficult and bureaucratically a problem for the President to seek to delegate that authority to any other individual. I can think of the Berle operation and of the Ed Lansdale operation - the two that come to mind at the moment - I am sure that there were others - at which this concept was tried

and it really didn't work out very well. The Lansdale operation fizzled out into virtually nothing - not from lack of trying and not from lack of co-operation even - I think everybody tried to cooperate very, very loyally with it, but the problem simply was not soluble by such methods. You see, what would happen in something like this - as I recall it, particularly in the Lansdale operation - various covert operations which would have fairly high noise levels were planned and then, when the President came up against the decision would you go ahead and would you not go ahead with this particular thing, he would often draw back from it, for understandable and sound reasons at the time.

B. Was the President meeting directly with this group, or how was he getting these put before him?

J. As I recall it, Mac Bundy was putting these things before him at the time. He met in the early days of it, a few times, with General Lansdale. But as I recall it, Mac Bundy put it before him, mostly.

B. How long did this go on? It started in the summer or spring of '61?

J. It started in the summer of '61. As I recall it, it must have been five or six months.

B. It fizzled out long before the missile crisis.

J. Yes, it was - as I recall it, it was nominally still in existence at the time of the missile crisis but it didn't figure in and was formally liquidated shortly after the missile crisis.

B.. By the time you got to all of these special projects like getting the prisoners back, you know, Donovan's operation and the medicine shipments, etc., all of these in effect, as special projects, replaced the Lansdale operation, I guess, didn't they?

J. Oh, entirely so.

B. The Attorney General had moved.

J. Entirely so. And you see the Lansdale operation was replaced by the Coordinator of Cuban Affairs in the Department.

B. Oh, that is the historical continuity of it.

J. That's the historical continuity of it. Going back to this Coordinator idea, we set up - I can't remember - it must have been the summer of '61 - we brought Cottrell back from CINCPAC, where he was POLAD, and he was made Coordinator of Vietnamese Affairs, and then on the liquidation of the Lansdale operation, after the Cuban missile crisis, a Coordinator of Cuban Affairs was set up in the Department, who is now John Crimmins. These operations were set up to provide a strong focal point of coordination within the Department of State on these operations, and in general I think it worked reasonably well. This was in part, very frankly, the Department's answer to the effort to set up outside coordinators - or to set up coordination over in the Department of Defense. as was done with Ed Lansdale.

B. This in a way - I guess the President really came back to more and more conventional solutions to these organizational problems, and even though he had a penchant for wanting to designate somebody to deal with them, he was prepared to designate them more and more back within the regular machinery.

J. Yes, as time went on he was prepared to do so. Well, I think this brings us up pretty well to the Cuban crisis and much has been written about this.

Tape #3 for the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library by U. Alexis Johnson

I am making this tape from my home in Saigon. I commenced making these recordings for the Memorial Library with William Brubeck, who was my interviewer during the time that I was in Washington. Before we had an opportunity to finish the tapes - the job that we had undertaken - I was suddenly transferred to Saigon upon the resignation of Henry Cabot Lodge as Ambassador here. The President made the decision and asked me to serve on a Tuesday, at the end of June, and I left on Friday directly for Saigon by KC-135 tanker in order to arrive here before Henry Cabot Lodge left. I was followed some ten days later by Maxwell Taylor who had been appointed as Ambassador. I was asked to serve as Deputy Ambassador to Ambassador Taylor. Hence I did not have an opportunity to finish these tapes before leaving for Saigon, and here in Saigon I have no one who would be a suitable interviewer for me. Hence I am undertaking to finish this without an interviewer. I have this afternoon finally had an opportunity to read over and make editorial corrections, which were very minor, in the first two tapes which I had made with Brubeck as interviewer.

On re-reading the transcript, I found that there are a few items which I would want to go back over and pick up -- items which have some interest and relevance, I believe -- some of the matters we were discussing in those days.

On the earlier tape, in discussing the situation in Laos, and President Kennedy's attitude toward it, I referred to the understandable reluctance that he had in using American ground forces in Asia, particularly in remote areas such as Laos. This has also been true with regard to

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of the group depended very heavily upon preserving its anonymity, and except for the book that I mentioned, I can't remember the author, its anonymity was well preserved throughout the period that I was serving in Washington.

Well, now we turn to the Cuban missile crisis in the fall of 1962. First, let me say that this entire crisis can be broken down into several quite distinct sections. In my own mind, it breaks down into four periods, that is, the period prior to the discovery of the missiles on the flight of October 14, and the readout on October 15, i.e., the whole history of the intelligence effort which finally led to the discovery of the missiles. Then there is what I would call the planning period after the discovery and identification of the missiles on October 15 up to the President's speech on Monday, October 22. On Monday, October 22, with the speech we moved to what I would call and characterize as the action period. This action period continued until Sunday, October 28, when Khrushchev announced that they were going to withdraw the missiles. The fourth and final period you might call the post-October 28 period, i.e., the period during which we were negotiating on details with the Soviet Union, and the missiles were finally pulled out, and the negotiations that have taken place and actions that have taken place since that time.

With respect to the pre-crisis period, many people have made statements that if only this recommendation of theirs had been carried out, or that recommendation of theirs had been carried out, or if only people had listened to them better than they had, that the missiles might have been discovered earlier than they were. There have also been statements made which, by

implication at least, say that the Department of State and the Secretary of State, by various views that they held or by decisions they made, prevented earlier discovery of the missiles, particularly the programming of the U-2 flights.

Let me say that being intimately familiar with the whole program of U-2 flights and all our other efforts at intelligence acquisition in Cuba, I know of no proposal that was made by anybody that was turned down by anybody in the Department of State or elsewhere which could have led to earlier discovery of the missiles.

Now, to turn to the planning phase, i.e., from October 15 when it was determined that the missiles were there until October 22, the time of the President's speech. I might note that this was a period of intense and, of course, very secret and closely held efforts in which I participated fully at every meeting and every portion of the inter-departmental activity and the activity with the President of which I am aware. Many accounts have been written of this period. I can say as a fact that there was no account kept by any single individual. Naturally, all of us who participated have a blur of recollections of it as a period of very intense activity and difficult to reconstruct in its entirety. An effort was made at the request of the President to do so immediately following the crisis. This was done by Frank Sieverts, of the Office of Public Affairs of the Department, who wrote a TOP SECRET account with the assistance and help of all those who participated. I worked with Frank in making up this account, I along with the others who participated, and in doing so, I had the advantage of using notes that had been kept by Paul Nitze, the only participant in the meetings

that I know of who kept any notes at all. These were pencilled notes of a very outline form. Drawing on my recollections and drawing on Paul Nitze's notes, I have gone through Sievert's account in great detail. I have a copy of it here in front of me, and with some pencilled corrections I have made, I feel that it is as close to a true and complete account as could possibly be made, and, as far as I know, the only such account that exists. I have recommended to the Department that this document be made a part of the John Fitzgerald Kennedy Library files, because I believe that it is essential to those files. It is a large paper, somewhat over 200 pages of double-spaced typing. Thus I will in this account not seek to duplicate what is in that very complete and detailed account, but rather to discuss the crisis in general terms and general impressions as I recall them today, assisted, of course, by having this paper in front of me. Although the details, of course, become blurred, the emotions of that period could never be forgotten by any of those of us who lived through all of those days. Throughout that period, the one solid rock and the one thing that kept all of us on course was the steady, matter-of-fact way in which President Kennedy handled his meetings, and the attitude of calmness that he at all times exhibited. Any trace of nervousness or shooting from the hip on his part at that time could have had profound influence upon all those who were surrounding him and seeking to advise him. Much has been said about "hawks" and "doves" in the group that were advising him, and on this, let me say that I think that almost everybody changed his position at least once, sometimes several times, during those days leading up to the decision as to the action that we would take. As far as I was concerned my own immediate reaction was that the most satisfactory and safest way

of dealing with it would be for a quick, and hopefully clean, air strike against the missiles without prior warning to Cuba or to the Soviet Union. This, it seemed to me, would present the least challenge to the Soviet Union. However, as the Air Force figures in the numbers of planes which they would require went up, and the numbers of missiles that we encountered continued to be increased, it became clear that a small quick, "clean" strike type of approach to the problem was simply not practicable, and I finally came around to the quarantine and blockade approach, along with most of the others, and this was the approach that was finally attempted. If I could be permitted a few general observations on the situation, I would like to say that the government worked together as individuals and as a government in a more magnificent manner at that time than anything that I have ever seen in the government. People exchanged views freely, people worked in full cooperation with each other, views and opinions were seldom, if ever, divided along departmental lines. So-called "doves" and so-called "hawks" could be found in both State and Defense. People were honestly searching for the best solution that could be found. I have also said since that it was a model in the ability to blend a political and a military course of action together so as to get the full benefit out of each. It seems to me that in the light of the Cuban action, the action that was taken at that time, it has now become clear that we no longer can have a war plan in isolation from a political plan. Any plan that we have must be a political-military plan such as was used in Cuba, with each item being perfectly and closely blended into the other. It was also an example, in my mind, of the use of military power without getting involved in the use

of violence, which so quickly becomes out of control. As I have told many War College classes since that time, the end of military power of course is not with shooting; the end is using it to accomplish national purposes. We used our military power and used it very successfully in Cuba without firing a shot. It is also an example of the fact that in the world of nuclear weapons today, the President of the United States has control of virtually unlimited power, and correspondingly having unlimited power, he requires virtually unlimited control. The day that a commander in the field could be given a mission and permitted to go off to carry out the mission only with broad guidance is gone. The world is entirely too dangerous for that. This I know came out, particularly during the Cuban crisis and particularly with the Navy. I remember Admiral Anderson and other Admirals of the Navy were not at all pleased at having in effect their destroyers controlled from the Cabinet Room at the White House.

However, it was only by such fine selective and detailed control that we were able to bring about the result that we did. I am convinced that any other control could have resulted in the situation's getting quickly out of hand, not because of lack of confidence on the part of anybody, but simply because the President is at the only point at which all aspects of a situation like that can be seen and the point from which all aspects of a situation like that can be seen and the point from which all actions must have careful control. It was also successful because the United States was not bluffing. We as a government and a country cannot be successful at bluffing. We meant what we said and we were able to communicate to the Soviet Union the fact that we did mean what we said, and having meant what we said, we

were able to accomplish our purpose without becoming involved in hostilities. This, to my mind, is also a lesson. I feel that in critical situations around the world that we must decide what we are going to do, and, having decided what we are going to do, communicate to the other side that the best way of avoiding hostilities and the best way of avoiding war is to be willing to go to war from causes or for reasons that are credible to the other side, and in which you are able to communicate your resolve to the other side. This, for example, we have not been as yet successful in doing here in Southeast Asia.

Going back to the subject of hawks and doves, even when it became evident that an air strike to dig out the missiles would involve a very massive attack with a great number of civilian casualties, there were still those who were honestly proposing it strongly as a course of action. At this time, Bobby Kennedy's good sense and his moral character were perhaps decisive among those who were working on the problem. Bobby spoke very feelingly of the fact that if the United States were to take such action, it would be a repetition of the Japanese action at Pearl Harbor, and neither on moral nor on political grounds would it be defensible and the United States and President Kennedy would go down as one who had wreaked a Pearl Harbor upon Cuba. He made the argument very strongly and very powerfully and had much influence on those who were working on the problem.

Following the initial meeting with the President on the morning of October 16 after the photographic readout on the discovery of the missiles had been communicated to the President, a group was formed which spent its entire time the next week working on the problem of making its recommendation

This group, which became known as the Executive Committee, consisted of Bob McNamara, the Secretary of Defense; Ros Gilpatric, Paul Nitze, and General Taylor from Defense; from State -- Secretary Rusk, George Ball, Ambassador Thompson, Ed Martin, who was then Assistant Secretary for Latin Affairs, and myself. Then there was John McCone from the CIA, Secretary Dillon of the Treasury, and from the White House, Bobby Kennedy, MacGeorge Bundy and Ted Sorensen. We met continuously in session night and day working at the problem. We managed to maintain complete and absolute secrecy up to the very last phases of the action, that is, up to the time the President had made his speech. At various times, the President brought in other people for the meetings. Dean Acheson, Bob Lovett and Adlai Stevenson, during the latter stages, are the names that come to my mind.

There was common and implicit acceptance that we had to do something about getting the missiles out, that is, that this was intolerable, and all the discussions revolved around simply the action that could and should be taken. Only in the latter phases, do I recall, did MacGeorge Bundy raise simply as a question for discussion, not as a proposition, the discussion as to whether or not it was tolerable to retain the missiles there and in effect to do nothing. This was, of course, rejected. The fact that we had to do something was implicitly accepted by all. We normally met in George Ball's conference room, and we had no stenographers or any other outside people present. In fact, we did not even inform our own secretaries, doing most of our work in longhand. The meetings usually were simply discussions normally led by Dean Rusk, in which various propositions were rejected, considered or refined, and one of our methods of working was to take a proposition which seemed to commend itself, have the proponents of that proposition

war-game it, you might call it, that is, work out a plan of action, put up the arguments for it, and then let the others shoot at it, and examine it for its strength and its weaknesses. It finally refined down to the question of quarantine, which was finally approached, or an air strike as I have mentioned. During the various stages throughout this, we held discussions with the President, informing him of various views and letting him know our thoughts. He was at all times very careful not to express any definitive views of his own, but asked leading questions and drew out and tried to find out the weaknesses in what was being put forth. I well remember that at one of our last sessions with him before his speech, he said that perhaps it would be best for the proponents of one point of view if he did not accept their advice, because if he didn't, they would always be able to say that if he took the other and it didn't work, that if he had accepted theirs, it would have worked. But in this business there were no second guesses. President Kennedy was understandably reluctant to commit himself until it was absolutely necessary to do so, and finally did not commit himself until the very drafting of the speech that was to be given on Monday evening. The necessity of having that speech in the hands of our posts making all the preparations beforehand to deal with foreign governments on it, as well as the military preparations that were required, finally resulted in getting the President's agreement in final text on late Sunday night. It was only, in fact, during the drafting of the speech itself that some of the final decisions and details of the decisions were worked out. As far as my own role was concerned, having become a proponent of the quarantine approach, instead of drafting long papers of pros and

cons as some of the members of our group were seeking to do, I had drafted what I called a "scenario", set forth in very simple terms the exact actions both military and political, to be taken in various stages. Of course, I drew on the discussions in the group in doing this up. This scenario was discussed, and with some modifications, was the paper on this that was finally shown to the President. This scenario which was only a little over three pages, contained all of the major elements of all the actions that were taken to implement the quarantine action, both on the political and military side. In my own mind, it is a sample of the type of thing that we need to do for any future situation of this kind.

As an episode and example of the type of pressure the President was under, George Ball and I had drafted a letter which formed the basis of the letter of October 27 which the President sent to Khrushchev and finally formed the basis of settlement. The draft that Ball and I had done was quite explicit and contained within it the safeguards that we thought were important and which should form the basis of a real understanding. When we got to the White House, Adlai Stevenson was on the phone from New York with the President, with an entirely different and much, I would say, softer, less explicit draft. Adlai Stevenson's draft would obviously be useful as obtaining an immediate solution, but most of us, particularly George Ball and myself, felt that it contained within it the seeds of future difficulty. The President finally took a part of our draft and left out some of the more important points, we felt, together with a part of Stevenson's draft, and this finally formed the letter that was sent. Nothing succeeds, of course, like success. The letter did form the basis of a settlement and

did get the agreement to pull out the missiles that we had been seeking. However, its ambiguities, particularly with respect to the so-called pledge of invasion against Cuba, are continuing to plague us. Perhaps our harder draft would not have accomplished the purpose of obtaining the settlement. However, I do point this out simply to connect it with the President's desire and usual instinct to deal with the immediate matter at hand, rather than seeking to look far into the future. I am not saying he was wrong. I am simply indicating this as a facet of the way he worked, and the decisions that he made.

I will not seek to go into any more detail of the Cuban affair, but to say in conclusion that those were days that were obviously great and stirring for our country. They were great and stirring days for those of us who had the opportunity to work with a great and noble President.

I will skip over the next year and come down to Wednesday, November 20, 1963. The other senior officers in the Department being away, I had been for a few days in charge of the Department as Acting Secretary. On that day, we had received a communication from Prince Sihanouk in Cambodia, asking us to cut off our aid. I went over with Roger Hilsman to the White House at 5:30 in the evening on Wednesday, November 20, to discuss the matter with the President. We briefly outlined the problem to him and made our recommendation that we cut off aid. He went over the draft telegram that we had prepared and added some words of friendship and conciliation to Sihanouk. He was always seeking to find a means around problems. He was always seeking to conciliate; he was always seeking to understand other people and what their motives were. He could never quite accept the fact that other people would not always return his good will.

We added the phrases and words that the President wanted in the telegram and took our leave. To the best of my knowledge, this was the last official foreign policy business that the President transacted, because he left the next morning on his trip which eventually led him to Dallas on November 22.

Almost every person alive in the world at the time will always remember the rest of his life where he was, and what he was doing when he received the news of President Kennedy's death. I was having lunch on the eighth floor of the Department of State with Howard Jones, our Ambassador to Indonesia. Someone tapped me on the shoulder, called me out into the hall, and said that the President had been shot and that George Ball wanted to see me in his office right away. I immediately went to Ball's office, and he and I, listening to the radio, finally heard those dread words, "The President is dead". This great country of ours and each of us who served with him are better because he lived.

This has been recorded in Saigon on November 7, 1964, just fifteen days before the first anniversary of his death. This is the end of this tape and whatever contribution I have been able to make to keeping alive his memory and the understanding of a great President.